



COMMUNITY blog



Celebrate the History of Roller Derby!

August 12, 2013
By Jerry Seltzer

[ROLLER DERBY >](#)



Today, we have another guest post from [Jerry Seltzer](#), often referred to as “The Commissioner” of roller derby.

His father, Leo Seltzer, invented the sport in 1935

and Jerry has followed in his footsteps since 1957, going from roller derby promoter (SF Bay Bombers) to television syndicator, to co-founder of BASS tickets, to Vice President of Sales and Marketing at Ticketmaster and now, finally, to Brown Paper Tickets, where he is serving a role as an Outreach and Sales Representative. We are honored to have a living legend as part of our team and Jerry has a ton of great stories on derby history and the history of the modern ticketing industry as we know it today.

Today, on the eve of roller derby’s 78th birthday, he shares a little bit of history of the sport and who would know better than the son of the sport’s inventor?

So, without further ado, here’s the man himself: Jerry Seltzer, the Roller Derby Jesus!

Pictured above is the historic [Chicago Coliseum](#).

It was built in the late 1800s, constructed largely from the bricks of the terrible Civil War-era [Libby Prison](#) in Richmond, Virginia, which was re-located to 1513 S. Wabash St. in Chicago in 1889. For a long time it was the main exposition and gathering place for Chicagoans: the 1896 Democratic convention was held here, and events from sporting goods shows to basketball and horse shows utilized the building.

But, on August 13, 1935, my father Leo Seltzer put about 20 men and women on roller skates for a skate marathon on the Coliseum track that equalled the distance of the United States from coast to coast. All for a cash prize of \$500.

A team was one man and a woman, and they would alternate, and rest, on view, in the infield between skating times. The event started each day in the morning and lasted until about midnight. The admission was 10 cents, and the skaters augmented their winnings by performing skits, or singing during the breaks (called open houses). Fans would throw coins to show their approval. The players were fed and housed separately within the North Hall of the building.

Seltzer received much condemnation for allowing women to compete but knew that was a major attraction for the audience.

And roller derby was born.

The last derby in the Coliseum was skated in the 1960’s. The building was then used as the main gathering place for Elijah Muhammad, and the speakers included Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali.

The building was demolished in 1982. There are housing units there today.

Many of the almost 1500 modern roller derby leagues around the world are celebrating the 78th anniversary of their sport this week. Tomorrow, **Tuesday, August 13**, the actual anniversary, [Santa Cruz Derby Girls](#) are having a Red Cross/Brown Paper Ticket blood drive and the [Undead Bettys](#) will be having a 78th anniversary drive in Livermore, California on **Friday, August 16**.

For more from Jerry on roller derby and his extensive experience in the ticketing industry, check out [his other posts on our blog](#). If you want to catch a derby event in your neck of the woods and celebrate the sport’s anniversary properly, browse the hundreds of derby events on our site. Just put in “roller derby” in the “Keywords” section or choose “Sports>Roller Derby” under the “Category” section.

Happy Birthday roller derby! Here’s to 78 more years.

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